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Reasons to Realize That We Can't Really Know about Unrealized Possibilities

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Reasons to Realize That We Can't Really Know about Unrealized Possibilities

Joseph Klein

Introduction and Basic Concepts of Modality

In this essay I intend to argue that we do not have access to knowledge of any possibility beyond those which are realized in the actual world. To do so I will describe some basic ideas and concepts relating to modality and argue that there seems to be a lack of positive justification for modal knowledge. I will then outline and discuss an argument concerning evolution that I believe might give some positive justification for being distrustful of modal intuitions. Finally, I will talk about some implications of the argument and provide an example of how we might reinterpret our intuitions given this different perspective.

Philosophers and laymen alike are very used to thinking about the world as they believe it to actually be. We tend to take for granted that statements such as '2+2=4' and 'George Washington was the first president of the United States' are true, and that these truths are parts of the way the world is. People also tend to believe that there are ways that the world might have been different from the way it actually is. They suppose that when they stumble and catch themselves that they could have fallen, and that instead of living the life they do, they could have never been born.

These second type of beliefs concern modal facts, or facts about what is possible, necessary, or impossible.¹ In this context, the word 'possible' refers to what is often called metaphysical possibility. For the purposes of this essay I will be discussing this kind of

¹ Anand Vaidya, "The Epistemology of Modality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/modality-epistemology/>

possibility as an objective feature of the world, regardless of human knowledge or lack of knowledge concerning it. This is in contrast to epistemic possibility, which concerns what can be said about the actual world as far as can be known from a limited subjective epistemic position. To distinguish the difference between epistemic and metaphysical possibility, I will describe a pair of scenarios which demonstrate each.

Suppose that my friend flips a coin and covers it with his hand, such that I can see that it landed heads up but he cannot. As far as he knows, the coin may be heads or it may be tails; it is epistemically possible given his knowledge that the coin landed in either position. In contrast, my knowledge of the situation includes knowledge of the actual outcome of the coin toss. I can therefore not say that it is epistemically possible that the coin landed on tails, as my judgement is restricted by my knowledge that the coin really landed on heads.

On the other hand, we can identify what I call metaphysical possibility if I were to say something like, “Regardless of my knowledge of how the coin actually landed, there is some sense in which it could have landed tails instead of heads.” This sort of possibility seems to imply that there is knowledge to be found beyond what actually occurs. Our subjective epistemological knowledge of actuality does not immediately rule out the existence of metaphysical possibilities, as both my friend and I could be inclined to agree that it is metaphysically possible for the coin to have flipped either way, even if we have different understandings of what is epistemically possible.

To say that some proposition is epistemically possible would suggest that none of the evidence I have access to seems to rule it out. If I did not know that the morning star and the evening star are both names that designate the same celestial body, then it is epistemically possible from my vantage point that the morning star is not the evening star, even if someone

else knows perfectly well that they are in fact the same body. This other person would in that situation say that it is epistemically impossible that the morning star is not the evening star, because he knows it to be false.

It may also be worth noting that there are cases in which it initially appears that something can be metaphysically impossible, but also epistemically possible. In the example mentioned above, it might seem to me that the morning star could be different from the evening star. Yet, some such as Kripke have argued that a posteriori necessities exist.² In other words, there are certain necessarily true propositions that can only be proven true via experience rather than mere reflection. The identity relationship between the ‘morning star’ and the ‘evening star’ is an example of this. If the morning star is indeed identical to the evening star, then they appear identical by necessity. However, as suggested above I may be unaware that they are identical. Thus, it may be the case that it is both epistemically possible and metaphysically impossible that ‘The morning star is not the evening star.’

I will also be using possible world semantics as a way of discussing modal propositions. According to this framework, a proposition p is possible if it can be said to be true in at least one possible world. p is necessary if it is true in all possible worlds, and p is impossible if it is true in no possible worlds. It is also important to note that the actual world itself also exists within the set of all possible worlds, given that it is a realized possible world. The precise ontological status of possible worlds is itself a topic of debate. Some believe that they all exist in a similar way that the actual world exists; others consider them merely useful fictions for describing metaphysical possibility. However, I will try to set up my argument in such a way that it might be relevant to those with either view.

² Saul Kripke, “Identity and Necessity,” in *Identity and Individuation*, ed. M.K. Munitz (New York: New York University Press, 1971) 135–164.

Here is how possible world semantics can be used in a particular case. Most people would agree that it was metaphysically possible for the U.S. to have lost the Revolutionary War. Using possible world semantics, we would say that there is some possible world in which it is true that the U.S. lost the war. In contrast, statements like ' $2+2=5$ ' are said to be true in no possible world. This is the case, because it is often thought that mathematical truths are necessary. Truths like ' $2+2=4$ ' are said to be true in all possible worlds, including the one mentioned above in which the U.S. lost.

In this paper I attempt to defend the view that we are not justified in our belief that we have modal knowledge beyond what we know of the actual world. Most normal experiences involve the world as it actually is which we come to know largely via our perception and capacity to reason. It is not so clear how we could come to know of unrealized possibilities. Some theories postulate that it is in virtue of things such as perception, deduction, or intuition that we come to be aware of modal truths. Another popular view today is that we access modal knowledge by conceiving of possibilities. In any case, what remains consistent is that we are claimed to possess to some faculty of mind by which we can garner modal knowledge. It is this alleged faculty that I will attempt to reject in this paper.

First though, I will briefly present Yablo's account of conceivability as an example of one attempt to devise a method of finding modal truths.

Yablo's Account of Conceivability and Possible Worlds

According to Yablo, we can only say that p is possible when we can conceive of a world that verifies p , or to put it in other words, p accurately describes that imagined world.³ He tries out several different ways of defining conceivability, and ultimately settles on one that rests on our ability to imagine things. There are certainly some things that we cannot imagine, for instance a world with square circles. In such a case where we cannot imagine a world where p is true, then we can consider that world inconceivable.

When we attempt to imagine non-actualized situations, we can only manage it with a certain degree of detail, but possible worlds according to Yablo are supposed to be as detailed and comprehensive as the actual world. Nonetheless, he believes that even though we may only be able to imagine certain details of a situation at any given time, that we may imagine these situations as being a part of a much larger possible world. We need only be able to focus on the relevant factors in that world that relate to the truth-value of p .

For example, we can examine the statement that ‘I could have eaten a bagel this morning for breakfast.’ When we want to imagine this possibility, we think of ourselves in an imaginary scenario in which we are eating a bagel that same morning. This imagining includes more than just eating the bagel, but also features various information about the scenario in general. We imagine how the scene would play out, and unless there is some fact about the scenario that makes the imagining incoherent in some way, the proposition in question is conceivable. However, if we tried to imagine drawing the square circle, then we would fail to properly conceive of it because the contradiction brought about by their definitions makes it impossible.

He believes that if we can imagine such a scenario and cannot find a proposition that is plausible and makes p impossible we are *prima facie* justified in accepting that we can conceive

³ Stephen Yablo, “Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53, no. 1 (1993): 26–29.

of p and that p is possible. In this way, if Yablo is correct, conceivability can be a guide to possibility.

A Lack of Positive Justification

From this point onward I will be putting forward my criticisms of views such as Yablo's, as well as defending my own position. I will start by arguing that there is a lack of positive justification for the claim that we can gain knowledge of unrealized possible worlds.

Yablo himself briefly addresses this point⁴. He admits, for one, that there is no evidence that conceivability can guide us to possibility besides that which is obtained via that particular faculty, which suggests circular justification. He tries to counter this by drawing an analogy between our alleged ability to determine possibility and our perceptual faculties, which seem open to the same criticism. After all, he suggests that there seems to be no obvious basis from which to conclude that our perceptual system is reliable without using our perception in making that judgement. If I want to conclude that the thing that I am seeing is indeed a chair, how could I possibly determine that to be the case without using perception? And if we are so willing to assume *prima facie* that perception is reliable in this context, why not judge our modal intuitions the same way? This treatment of modal intuitions as a faculty for knowledge comparable to perception isn't limited to Yablo either. Van Inwagen makes a similar analogy, except he does so to make the point that even though we can generally trust our modal intuitions to be accurate *prima facie*, that they can be misleading in unusual cases⁵.

⁴ Stephen Yablo, "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?" 3–4.

⁵ Peter van Inwagen, "Modal Epistemology," *Philosophical Studies* 92, no. 1 (1998): 69–70.

This defense seems at face value to have potential. It is true that we *prima facie* accept our perceptual knowledge as pertaining to the actual world, however there are relevant differences that seem to justify our continued trust in our perceptual faculties, including having a seemingly reliable means of differentiating veridical and non-veridical experiences. If we are uncertain of what we perceive, we know some ways of figuring out. We might rely on a different sense modality or perhaps infer from our other knowledge of actuality what we are likely to perceive in a certain context. If I am uncertain whether what I am seeing is a windmill or a giant, one way of gathering evidence might be via touching or possibly listening. Without a similar system in place, it does not seem to be the case that we can give modal faculties the same level of trust we give our sensory faculties, unless we do have an effective way of clearing up ambiguous cases. Further, as I will suggest in my main argument, perception is fundamentally disanalogous from modal intuition in terms of the evolutionary advantage being provided.

Of course, Yablo attempts to provide a means of differentiating genuine possibilities and mistakes of intuition with his theory of conceivability. However, ultimately his method of clearing up ambiguous cases, or solving disputes as to whether or not *p* is possible or necessary, seems to be based on the same intuitions that lead him to accept modal knowledge in the first place. In the cases where it may seem at a glance to be that *p* is true in some possible world, Yablo dismisses the notion that *p* could be necessary even without him having access to any independent reason to reject possibility⁶. Because of this dismissal his view of modality presumes that necessity is less common than it could be as far as he should be able to know. Similarly, van Inwagen suggests that “we are inclined (at least initially) to regard assertions of

⁶ Stephen Yablo, “Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?” 33-34.

possibility as easier to establish than assertions of necessity.”⁷ This might indeed be the case, given that we accept that necessary truths are always also possible. Nonetheless, this fact merely means that there are at least as many possible truths as there are necessary truths. Yablo wants to say that there are a vast many more contingent possibilities than there are necessary ones. Given his use of conceivability as a guide, he seems to allow as many as we can, in principle, imagine. His theory seems to suggest that there are about as many possibilities as we can conceive if not more. There is a parallel in his view of metaphysical and epistemic possibility. In both cases, something is assumed to be possible unless are given a particular clear reason to doubt our intuitive assumption. There is no clear positive evidence in favor of necessity being as rare in reality as that intuition might lead people to believe.

Arguments Concerning Evolution

I will now get into positive argumentation against our ability to detect unrealized possibilities. Before describing my argument, however, it is worth mentioning an argument by Robert Nozick⁸, upon which my own is based. His argument is for a weaker version of skepticism than my own. However, it appears that his argument can be altered to induce doubt of a wider range of beliefs. I will not directly discuss all of the premises as Nozick provides them. Instead, I will use a similar version to them in my own argument and defend them in that context. His argument can be described roughly as follows:

A1. There is no adaptive advantage to having accurate knowledge about all possible worlds.

⁷ Peter van Inwagen, “Modal Epistemology,” 67.

⁸ Robert Nozick, *Invariances* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 121-125

- A2. If there is no adaptive advantage to having accurate knowledge about all possible worlds, then there is no reliable faculty for detecting truths about all possible worlds.
- A3. Necessity is truth in all possible worlds.
- A4. If necessity is truth in all possible worlds, then there is no reliable faculty for detecting necessity.
- A5. There is no reliable faculty for detecting necessity.
- A6. If there is no reliable faculty for detecting necessity, then none of our beliefs about necessity are justified.
- A7. So, we are not justified in any of our beliefs that something is necessary.

As I mentioned above, the goal of this paper is to argue the point that we cannot have knowledge of unrealized possible worlds. This is a step beyond what Nozick is attempting with this argument, as he does not discount knowledge of possible worlds, but rather his conclusion is that only necessity in particular is brought into doubt. Nonetheless, I believe a similar argument can be made to bring modal claims into doubt altogether. If that argument is successful, then it will show Nozick's conclusion to be true also.

I will avoid using the distinction of necessary and contingent in my argument as they are terms that we can understand as being utilized based upon philosophers' assumption that unrealized possibility exists. This can be seen in their definitions, or at least one particular set of their proposed definitions. A proposition is necessary if and only if it is true in all possible worlds. It is contingent if and only if it is true in some but not all possible worlds. It is implicitly suggested here that knowledge of necessity/contingency entails knowledge of unrealized possibility, because to say that something is true in all/some possible worlds, implies the

existence of those sorts of possible worlds. It is the knowledge of the existence of those worlds that I would like to investigate more closely now. To avoid assuming any such implicit knowledge, I will then have to rely on more basic distinctions to question that sort of modal knowledge.

The following is my argument, structured very similarly to Nozick's:

- B1. There is no adaptive advantage from having knowledge of unrealized possible worlds.
- B2. If there is no adaptive advantage from having knowledge of unrealized possible worlds, then there is no faculty that can obtain such knowledge.
- B3. If there is no faculty that can obtain knowledge of unrealized worlds, then none of our beliefs about unrealized possible worlds are justified.
- B4. Therefore, none of our beliefs about unrealized possible worlds are justified.

As can be immediately seen, this argument includes premises that will require a great deal of defense. It will most assuredly be beyond the capacity of this one paper to provide a complete justification, though I will describe some reasons why each claim is sound.

Nonetheless, I believe these to at least seem feasible at a glance. For a fair amount of people from certain metaphysical beliefs, these sorts of claims might seem quite compelling. It is, at least, a direction from which one might wish to start to question modal dogma. With that in mind, I will now discuss each premise and attempt to defend it.

(B1)

The first premise states: “There is no adaptive advantage from having knowledge of unrealized possible worlds.”

The first bit of this claim is relatively simple to understand. An organism has an adaptive or evolutionary advantage, when that characteristic, ability, etc. permits that organism an increased likelihood of reproducing and passing along genetic data to viable offspring. The most talked about sort of advantage that gets discussed is the kind that allows an organism to better survive (thus giving it more time to mate and reproduce).

So, when we talk about our proposed ability to obtain modal knowledge, we would expect it to provide an adaptive advantage if it makes members of our species more effective at surviving or reproducing. The only way that knowledge seems to be an effective contributor towards these outcomes seems to be indirectly via our behaviors.

For example, our ability to see what is actually in front of us seems to be an adaptive advantage, because it gives us knowledge that we can use to better navigate the world. If I see a bear ahead of me, for instance, this causes me to obtain knowledge of the creature and that knowledge leads me to direct myself away from the danger, thus increasing my survivability.

Our alleged ability to obtain knowledge of unrealized possibility seems to not accomplish this beneficial change in behavior. To better understand why this is, I will distinguish two ways that we as organisms come up with modal statements: forward-looking (future possibilities) and backwards-looking (past possibilities).

I do not place modal beliefs about the present as being a category in and of itself because the present is so fleeting. You cannot say that some present actuality could be different in some possible world without that present becoming the past relative to you the moment after. Alternatively, some might think of the present as a span of time that covers the near past and

future. I think that such cases can be understood as being a sort of backwards-looking view of modality, at least initially. If I am watching basketball, and I think to myself that in some possible world another team could be playing instead, it seems that my intuition came from something like my belief that whoever decided the schedule could have changed their minds or a belief that some other team somehow took over the court. My view that things could be going differently right now seems to be based on something having gone differently in the past and leading to present or future differences. Thus, I consider such modal intuitions primarily backwards looking, although forward-looking modal beliefs might be abstracted based upon them.

Backward-looking modal beliefs are ones that concern how some past event or situation could have been different. We might reflect on how we could have never been born or how the Nazis could have won WWII. The propositions represented in these beliefs tend to be the most common kind for most philosophers to talk about, and there is at least one clear reason why that might be. It is much easier to separate metaphysical ideas of possibility from epistemic ones. It is relatively clear to find out what actually happened in the past in comparison to what will happen in the future. Therefore, any discussion of how things could have been different are accepted alongside our knowledge of how they actually did happen. In contrast, such a situation that we know is actually the case could not be epistemically possible if we know that it is actual. Thus, there is a noticeable distinction between the two types of possibility.

Given that backwards-looking modal beliefs concern things in the past there is a significant issue that must be worked around to explain how it might cause adaptive behaviors. This issue is the immutability of the past. Backwards-looking modal beliefs concern how actual things we cannot currently change could have been different. However, that knowledge seems to

have little to do with how we should orient ourselves in the world as it turned out to actually be. How can knowledge of what we know to be past unrealized possibilities let us navigate actuality in our present? If these possibilities do play a significant enough role in our behavior to improve our evolutionary fitness, then we would probably expect multiple examples of such situations.

It might be argued that a way backwards-looking modal beliefs can be useful is by influencing future behavior, as counterfactuals do. If, for example, I burned myself by getting too close to a fire, then I might say something like: “If I had not touched the fire, I would not have been burned.” This sort of counterfactual conditional might increase an organism’s chances of survival. I might use it as a justification for avoiding fires in the future, which might be evolutionarily advantageous. However, I believe that it is not in virtue of any genuine modal knowledge that this counterfactual is useful. The modal proposition implied by the statement is that I could have avoided touching the fire and consequently not been burned. This belief, in and of itself, seems neither necessary nor sufficient to compel me to stay away from fires in the future. Instead, there are two key bits of information that seem relevant in influencing me.

First, there is a perceived connection between touching fire and burning myself. This connection might be brought to awareness by a variety of means. In many instances we might appeal to Hume’s insight that we form the idea of a causal relation in response to some constant conjunction.⁹ Perhaps it is only after getting steadily closer to the fire and getting steadily hotter afterwards that we form a mental association. Perhaps the novelty of the two conditions plays a role as well. If I touched a fire for the first time and have never felt such a burning sensation before, I possibly associated the conditions in virtue of the common novelty.

⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000): 170

The second bit of information is that there is a generalization of the connection, such that it pertains to other distinct instances. This is not clearly obvious in the conditional itself, but it is necessary if the conditional is to influence behavior around different fires, at different times, or for other people.

The modal belief that seems implied for this expression need not be accurate in describing true facts about metaphysical possibility. That the conditional has a modal element does seem useful in virtue of it being separate from what actually occurs, but that does not suggest that it is true modal knowledge. The same lesson can be understood in virtue of a fictional fable just as easily, or even as a thought experiment. I might think up some story about a man who avoids fire and does not get burned, and the easiest way to do so is to imagine something that is as very much like the reality that I know with some small changes. A reason the non-actuality of counterfactuals is so useful here is that by separating the condition from actuality it makes it easier to generalize the situation to multiple scenarios, even if you have not experienced the scenario precisely as described. Thus, it is not in virtue of accurate modal knowledge that counterfactuals are evolutionary useful, though it might be in virtue of their fictionality.

Perhaps instead of back-wards looking beliefs, forward-looking modal beliefs are of adaptive value. These seem to have potential as they involve possible futures, which our actions and behaviors themselves seem to actualize. Perhaps my knowledge that it is metaphysically possible for me to get eaten by a bear if I approach it will help me avoid being mauled. However, these forward-looking beliefs are often contested by an opponent that backwards-looking beliefs often avoided: epistemic possibility. In the example above, it is epistemically possible that if you approach the bear, it will maul you. There are, after all, many unknowns when attempting to

predict the future, and as far as you know, mauling seems to be a likely outcome of approaching. Predictions about what will actually occur (based on induction, probabilities, etc.) seem useful in guiding behavior more than relying on what we might believe is metaphysically possible (which includes unlikely possibilities). You also do not know for certain (though you may have a good prediction) of whether or not you will choose to approach the bear. We are imperfect forecasters of our own behaviors a decent amount of the time, which leaves us open to imagine how the world might turn out to actually be.

This account of epistemic possibility being crucial in how we orient our behavior fits well with certain modern-day theories of decision-making. Our awareness of epistemic possibility seems to be rooted in our ability to imagine and conceive, similar to the views of metaphysical possibility presented by Yablo¹⁰ or Chalmers¹¹. Nanay has argued in favor of the view that in light of recent empirical evidence we can tell that imagination plays an active role in decision-making.¹² According to this view, “when we decide between two possible actions, we imagine ourselves in the situation that we imagine to be the outcome of these two actions and then compare these two imaginings.” Epistemic possibility seems to have a place in this process, in the same way as is described in the bear example above.

It is unclear still what advantage could possibly be gained here that would offer a significant adaptive advantage to our evolutionary ancestors. Backward-thinking modal beliefs seem to offer insight into things our behavior cannot change and forward-thinking modal beliefs seem to only offer advantage when it is confused with beliefs tied to epistemic possibility. Given

¹⁰ Yablo, “Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?” 1–42.

¹¹ David Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility,” in *Conceivability and Possibility*, ed. Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 145–200.

¹² Bence Nanay, “The Role of Imagination in Decision-Making,” *Mind and Language*, 31 no. 1 (2016): 137.

that these adaptive advantages have some noteworthy influence on survival or reproduction, we would expect that if modal knowledge was an adaptive advantage, then we would be able to find some situation in which such knowledge served such a function, yet this seems to not be the case.

(B2)

The second premise states that, “If there is no adaptive advantage from having knowledge of unrealized possible worlds, then there is no faculty that can obtain such knowledge.”

This premise is likely the most controversial and difficult to defend of the set, as it may prove to be avoidable most simply by appealing to a less naturalistic account of the mind. For some, this will substantially weaken the persuasiveness of the argument.

This premise is based on the notion that all of our deliberative and intuitive mental faculties exist as they do as the result of an evolutionary process, such that mutations that brought about a neurological adaptive advantage would more successfully be passed on to later generations than genes of organisms without the advantage, thereby over time causing that species to evolve with the advantaged neurological mutation with greater prominence. Within this naturalistic account, the origins of any such knowledge finding ability are explained through some similar evolutionary account. And provided that there is no fitness related advantage to having a faculty with the capacity to let one know about metaphysical possibility, we would not expect any organism to develop some such ability through natural means.

Some objectors might say here that evolution is not the only way that we have come to have the faculties of mind that we do. Perhaps, for instance at least a part of our mental experiences, qualia for instance, need to be explained by appealing to some sort of immaterial

aspect of reality. If this is true, then why not believe that we could have come to have some of our mental abilities through immaterial causes. I hope to avoid making too many commitments to a particular theory of mind here, however, it does seem to be the case that, at the very least, evolution offers the most well supported account of the origin of our mental capabilities. Our reliance on the biological makeup of our physical brains to think and problem solve with the success we do is clear from the wide variety of people with neurological disorders, who cannot think those same ways. Even if we accept that we cannot understand minds through material explanations alone, we should be inclined to accept that at least a large degree of how we think and come to know about the world is due to the physical and biological characteristics of our bodies. Our capacity for logic and perception, while not fully understood, still fit into the evolutionary story of adaptive advantages, as both provide such an advantage and seem dependent on the existence of specific biological systems. It even seems somewhat rare to find an experience or ability of the mind that does not clearly depend on some material feature of the body, to the point where many are tempted to believe that there are no such cases at all. We should therefore adopt the view that our modal intuitions are based upon some physical characteristic of our bodies unless given decent evidence to suggest otherwise. If physical, this suggests that they most likely exist due to either genetic factors and/or evolution or due to exposure to certain stimuli later in life.

Alternatively, it might be the case that our modal intuitions arise as an accident of some other mental faculty, such as imagination or abstract logical reasoning. It could be that we have come to know modal truths not because our species developed a faculty that persists through its effect on fitness, but because the ability is a side effect of some other mental capacity. However, this seems highly unlikely. If such were the case, it would seem as if we had developed the

ability to know unrealized possibility through either pure coincidence or through some form of outside intervention.

This sort of argument will not be persuasive to everyone. Some might, for instance suggest that the lack of evolutionary advantage for modal knowledge is itself reason to believe that our modal intuition is not physical in origin. This sort of view involves accepting the assumption that our modal intuitions are accurate in the first place, and that because they are accurate and they do not make us fit in an evolutionary sense, they must be trustworthy in virtue of some other non-evolutionary origin. Perhaps, for instance, modal knowledge is something afforded to us directly by God. Due to the initial presumption made, this is not so much an argument in favor of modal knowledge as it is a dismissal of my argument against.

It appears that the issue of the soundness of this premise is based to some extent on certain underlying metaphysical views regarding the nature of the mind, which I cannot hope to resolve here. I believe that ultimately a more naturalistic explanation for our modal intuitions will ultimately be better supported, but for the purposes of this paper I will leave the question somewhat open. Nonetheless, I believe it to be the case that a fair number of people who would accept this premise also presume that they have knowledge of modality, and it is they primarily who should be influenced by this argument.

An atheist materialist, for example, might be more inclined than others to accept that without an adaptive advantage, we should not have a faculty for obtaining modal knowledge. With nothing to appeal to for an explanation except for physical processes and matter, the evolutionary origin is likely the best available explanation.

Of course, I cannot lay out every perspective and state how each might relate to the premise. My point is merely that the premise and by extension the argument still likely has some persuasive power given the proper background.

(B3)

The third premise states that, “If there is no faculty that can obtain knowledge of unrealized worlds, then none of our beliefs about unrealized possible worlds are justified.”

The intuition behind this premise is fairly clear. If we have no faculty or system or mechanism that allows us to learn things about unrealized possibility, then in virtue of what can we know? Returning to the analogy between modal intuitions and other cognitive faculties, we might say that such a thing would be like saying that we can see without our visual system or think logically without the neural equipment which permits us to do so.

One possible way of rejecting this premise maintaining the belief in modal knowledge is to say that modal knowledge is not obtained via one faculty dedicated to that function, but rather from several others.¹³ Perhaps with some combination of our perceptual abilities, and our reasoning abilities, and maybe even our imaginative abilities we are able to reason our way towards justification for our knowledge of possible worlds and the knowledge of what is and is not possible.

However, this line of thought is not wholly convincing. Why should we believe that faculties, whose functions are normally to orient us in actuality, when working together in conjunction, should allow us to recognize unrealized possibilities? How, when we are thinking

¹³ Anand Vaidya, "The Epistemology of Modality", <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/modality-epistemology/>

about how the world is, was, and will be as far as we can tell, can we abstract how the world could have been or could be?

I think there is a similar intuition to be examined here as is seen in Hume's is-ought distinction, which arguably suggests that you cannot infer normative or prescriptive truths from descriptive ones.¹⁴ I believe that we should similarly say something about inferring unrealized truths from actual ones, as they seem to be different kinds of things that are not so obviously reconcilable. At the very least, if one were to attempt this, they would require an explanation of how this barrier is overcome in order for their view to be convincing.

Skepticism and Anti-realism

I've introduced an argument for skepticism regarding unrealized possibility and I've given some discussion concerning each of its three premises. If each premise is taken to be true it follows that the conclusion is true and we do not have modal knowledge. The value of the argument is that unlike most skeptical arguments against modality, this one gives some positive justification for adopting a skeptical position. At this point some will have already rejected the argument as given, whether for the reasons I mention in B2, or due to some other consideration. However, as an aside to my main argument, I would like to continue a bit further to address whether this leads merely to a skeptical view or whether a modal anti-realist view can be reasonably adopted.

The difference between the two perspectives as I use them in this essay can be described as such: A modal skeptic is skeptical about whether we can have knowledge of possible worlds,

¹⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1896), 469-470

including knowledge of whether or not they exist. An anti-realist, on the other hand, puts forth the stronger claim that such possible worlds besides the actual world do not exist.

Thus far I have argued in favor of the former, but it is worth briefly discussing the later at this point. After coming to skeptical conclusions, it is often acceptable to wonder whether a rule of parsimony should be employed to make philosophical discussions simpler. We tend to see a certain set of people showing a somewhat confident disbelief in God, for instance. This active disbelief is based on what they perceive as a lack of suitable justification. The belief that there exists no objective morality has been sometimes adopted in response to a similar lack of evidence. There may be concerns about taking laws of parsimony further than we should, but there seem to be some cases in which such methodology is useful. Therefore, it is worth considering whether unrealized possibility can or should be viewed in the same way.

I am somewhat inclined to be in favor of such an application of Ockham's razor at this time. When we can use simplicity as a justification for dismissing certain ideas is a somewhat contentious issue, but it seems fitting for the current circumstances. If my argument is successful, then it would follow that our modal intuitions are wholly unreliable and misleading when it comes to identifying possibilities. Additionally, these intuitions seem to be our sole justification for believing in metaphysical possibility altogether. If the alleged faculty we use is so misleading from the start (if it can be said to exist at all), why should we act as if it is just as likely as not that such possibilities exist? Given the untrustworthiness of our intuition, if we were forced to gamble on whether or not metaphysical possibilities exist, it seems to me that it is preferable to bet against what those intuitions tell us.

I'll use an analogy to argue this case. Suppose that your friend took a picture one night and the next day he shows it to you. It is a picture of the moon, and in front of the moon you see

a dark ovoid-looking shape. He says that he did not notice it before looking at the picture, but that after he saw it he was convinced it was a UFO. You take his camera from him and find a smudge on the lens, just in the right spot to make that image in the picture.

It is theoretically possible that there really was a UFO that was behind that smudge. However, your only reason for accepting the existence of that UFO in the first place was that you saw that smudge. Because this was the sole reason for accepting the UFO, you disregard the idea once finding that both the method of recording the object and the original justification for your belief were unjustified.

Possibility seems relevantly analogous given that the source of belief in possibility seems to be in the faculty that we have argued is unreliable and the sole method of obtaining information about possibility is that same faculty. For those reasons a modal anti-realist view might seem like it could be more justified than a simple skeptical one, albeit only slightly.

There is an additional thing that may be said of modal anti-realism. It seems to be the case that given this view, the only possible world that exists is the actual world, and that therefore, under the definition given earlier, this would qualify as a necessitarian perspective, meaning that all true propositions are also necessary. The claim that ‘I went to class last week’ is therefore necessary just as the proposition ‘all bachelors are unmarried’ is. This is an interesting point perhaps, but less so given that in questioning the notion of unrealized possibilities, we also questioned the additional ideas of necessity and contingency. To refer to this perspective is therefore somewhat misleading in that it presupposes a modal framework. Nonetheless, it is technically accurate. Further, it is practically useful because the framework can be used to more easily compare this type of necessitarianism to theories that do depend on a modal framework.

Nevertheless, I expect that there will be some reluctance to accept the arguments above. One reason might be the urge to be more cautious when applying the razor. It appears that one could reasonably choose to withhold judgement altogether if they so wished. I believe there to be a certain amount of risk in relying on arguments of parsimony, and a risk averse person may feel taking the step to anti-realism is not worth it. Another major force urging people to stay true to modality is a deeply felt intuition. So far I have talked about whether this intuition serves as an accurate guide towards knowledge of possibility. Now though, I would like to talk a bit about the intuition itself.

Modal Intuitions

Modal intuitions, especially given my naturalistic account of them, arguably seem to fall largely within the domain of psychologists more so than that of philosophers. There should be, in principle, some empirical evidence to eventually be sussed out that sheds light on why exactly we think of modality the way we do. Nonetheless, given that intuitions hold the sway that they do because of the trust people place in them, I feel it is necessary to propose a feasible alternative way of looking at some of our intuitions that is consistent with the perspective I put forward.

I believe that the root of our intuitions about possibility is deeply related to our intuitions about free will. There is a common intuition when considering our actions that we may genuinely choose between multiple possibilities. I have argued earlier that when we talk about forward-looking possibility, we often overlap it with what we consider epistemic possibility. This confusion, I believe is the source of our belief in metaphysical possibility as it is related to our future choices. This is consistent with the idea of epistemic freedom, which is the idea that our

“evidence while deliberating does not determine what decision [we make].”¹⁵ It is this sort of uncertainty in how we will act that can leave the impression that our actions are unbound and free, even when they are not. We can likewise think about other future possibilities in a similar fashion, given that we do not know with great confidence what precisely will occur. This would explain these sorts of forward-looking intuitions then.

I believe that backwards-looking modal intuitions are based on the same reaction. I will use an example to illustrate.

Suppose that I am walking to work and I catch my foot on the curb. I stumble a bit but manage to catch myself and avoid falling. “I almost fell,” I say, the implication being that I could have fallen but did not. That idea comes almost immediately to me and feels intuitively true.

In asking where I came up with the idea that I could have fallen, perhaps we ought to examine when I first regarded that as a likely possibility. In the moment that I stumbled, I felt uncertain about whether or not I would manage to regain my balance. In that moment therefore, it was epistemically possible for me to have fallen, even though in actuality I did not. Further, because of that epistemic uncertainty I may have incorrectly presumed metaphysical possibility I that moment.

But where does the backwards-looking modal intuition come from? One feasible explanation may be that they are the result of reflecting on scenarios that were once the product of forward-looking epistemic possibilities. We can remember our fear at the notion of falling and so we construct a scenario in our imagination featuring that formerly potential outcome. Because we mistake epistemic possibilities with metaphysical ones, perhaps we tend mistake backwards-looking reconstructed scenarios for metaphysical possibility as well. The frequency with which

¹⁵ Alison Fernandes, “Varieties of Epistemic Freedom,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, no. 4 (2015): 1-2.

we see modal references in our culture may also play a role in how often we assume certain possibilities. This is likely not a full account of the origin of our moral intuitions, but it is one way that we might reinterpret them in light of a change in perspective.

In this essay I have challenged the idea that we can have knowledge of unrealized possibilities. I have discussed the apparent lack of sufficient positive justification for the claim and provided an argument based on evolutionary fitness to defend my own position. Then, I briefly discussed whether parsimony can justify an anti-realist view of unrealized possibility. Finally, I ended off with a proposal of how we might reinterpret our intuitions concerning modality. With the considerations I have shown, I hope to have provided some compelling reasons to consider moving away from common sense views of modality and to instead adopt skepticism if not anti-realism as a view of unrealized possibility.

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